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CHAPTER SIX

THE COURSE OF MURIA LIFE: AGE

I. Old Age and the Climacteric

THE place of the aged in Muria society is not unenviable. The training in the ghotul instils into the minds of boys and girls the idea of respect for older people and, for all its stress on equality, a sense of the dignity of position and achievement. This attitude remains with the children all their lives. An older man, therefore, often enjoys a very favoured position. In time he becomes a member of the village, and even of the pargana, panchayat. The system of cross-cousin marriage, so largely prevalent in the tribe, ensures that he is surrounded by a large number of relatives and dependants. Among these he gradually rises to a position in which flattering attention is paid to his judgement and it is considered essential that he should be consulted in everything to do with the welfare of the tribe, the clan, the family, and the ghotul.

Nor is there any loss of the variety and colour of life. He still occasionally visits the scene of his youthful happiness and, if he is wise and tactful, the children will consult him about their affairs. If he has the art of music or story-telling he will command absorbed attention. He still goes to the great tribal festivals and the commercial Marhai in the larger villages. At these, if he is a Siraha he will dance and beat his drum as lustily as any chelik; he will meet scores of old friends and drink with them. At marriages, which he invariably attends, he has a special licence to play practical jokes and to indulge the coarsest behaviour. There are certain to be present many men and women who stand to him in the 'joking relationship', and a marriage is the stage whereon the Table of Relationship comes to dramatic life. Nobody is likely to think less of him for his pranks. Indeed the antics of the old men are an enlivening and picturesque feature of most marriages.

But, of course, the varied scenes he has witnessed and the bereavements he has suffered generally tend to make the old Muria at other times somewhat sad and meditative. Disease sometimes hampers his movements, though many old Muria are remarkably hale and hearty. A proverb runs: 'When a child he plays; when a boy he displays his beauty; in age his head shakes and he meditates.' This comparison of youth and age is a favourite one among the Muria. 'The baby has no hair; the youth dresses it; the old man's curls behind.'

The old village woman, Muria, Gond, Pardhan or Baiga, deserves the world's most profound respect. Her wrinkled face and bent indomitable form, which is so familiar a sight in every Muria village, is the symbol of the courage, devotion and the will to persevere characteristic of her race. Upon her falls the heavy burden of the work of an ever-growing household. She is expected to be present and to help at the confinements of every one of her descendants. She constantly has to care for her grandchildren and may even be called on to provide milk for them from her withered breasts. Should she be relieved of the burden of a family, her lot is no less arduous, and I have often seen the pitiful little huts in which some lonely, childless widow spends the evening of her days.

But the old woman's lot is not unbroken drudgery. The scheme and pattern of Muria life is well devised to break up the monotony of village existence with bright and vivid colours and gay bursts of song. The old woman too

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887 goes to the market and attends the festivals, though there is not so much for her in these as for the men. But her real hour of happiness is at a marriage. Here she may lay aside restraint and recapture the abandon of youth. Now she may drink heavily and for a few hours in blissful intoxication free herself of inhibitions and forget all that is tiresome and weary in her life. If the older men enliven the marriage scene with their buffoonery, [522 831] the older women divert it with their obscenity. There is nothing that they may not say, little they may not do. Their songs and their dance movements are outrageous and never fail to rouse laughter in the crowd.

888 In a very few cases Muria women grow riggish in old age. They adorn themselves with many ornaments and wear bright-coloured saris. This behaviour is not approved.

You are an old woman,
Forget your dances.
You are an old woman,
Yet on your buttocks is a tiny cloth
And flowers are in your hair.

Although there is a rule that women should never use their ghotul titles after marriage, when a group of old women who have grown up together in the same ghotul meet in later life, they usually use the old names in order to awaken happy memories of the past. I am told that then they exchange reminiscences through half the night and that such times are among the happiest of their lives.

886 As elsewhere in aboriginal India, the climacteric does not appear to be dreaded or even to be specially noticed. In India, women are old at 45 and they greet the cessation of the menstrual period with relief that they are now saved from its embarrassments. I have not been able to find any myth about the climacteric; there does not seem to be any rule about it or any desire to avert it. It is a purely natural phenomenon. 'The stream that flowed so long is dry', 'the old tree has begun to wither'. Some people believe that the tree withers because 'no one goes to an old woman,[1] so her vagina has no grain to eat; no rain falls in her stream, so how can it flow?'

II. Death and the Ghotul

761 883 The ghotul is a place of separations. But when a chelik or motiari dies there is a special feeling of sorrow, a sense of outrage, the conviction that something exceptional and abnormal has occurred. Sometimes the ghotul is closed for three days; where it is not closed the children gather sadly and there is no singing and there should be no intimacies. When older people die the dormitory is not closed. 'The ghotul is the *Dinda-mahdl*, the Palace of the Unmarried. As the Raja's Palace is not shut when people die in the town, neither is ours. But if two or three of the chelik and motiari die, then we shut it.' At Dongrigura, they said that when a chelik died, the motiari wept and next day initiated one of the younger boys and gave him the dead chelik's title, so that there might be no gap in their fellowship. When the Subedar died, they made his little brother Subedar next day and gave him as 'husband' to the Subedarin, his *anga*, or elder brother's 'widow'.

The death of a chelik or motiari is always abnormal. The death of a little child or of a child in the womb is no less unnatural. 'Just as in a field, rice

[1] A rather cynical proverb runs: 'How disgusted is a man who eats stale food in the morning and goes to bed with an old woman at night.'